

## **Korean EFL Learners' Metadiscourse Use as an Index of L2 Writing Proficiency**

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### ABSTRACT

The current research investigated the correlation between L2 writing proficiency and metadiscourse use in argumentative texts. Metadiscourse is recognized as one of the key strategies for building interaction between a writer and an audience in written discourse. In order to explore the effect of proficiency on the use of metadiscourse markers, the study analyzed two corpora of argumentative essays written by three different proficiency groups of Korean EFL learners and native speakers of English. The focus of analysis was the frequency and range of two main subcategories of metadiscourse, i.e., interactive and interactional resources. The findings revealed marked variations in both quantitative and qualitative aspects of metadiscourse use across different proficiency levels. As proficiency develops, writers showed less reliance on the interactive resources, more balanced use of interactional resources (i.e., hedges and boosters), and expansion in the range of metadiscourse markers used. The findings provide some useful insights into teaching and learning of metadiscourse in persuasive writing which serve to increase a dialogic sense of interaction and audience involvement.

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## I. Introduction

Hyland (1998a) defines the term *metadiscourse* as the aspects “of a text which explicitly organize the discourse, engage the audience and signal the writer’s attitude” (p. 437). In other words, metadiscourse functions throughout a text to help writers build and organize their arguments in order to facilitate the readers’ interpretation, understanding, and engagement in the text. It is used as a means of improving the quality of a text embodying the interaction between a writer and readers. In particular, metadiscourse is generally recognized as a key feature in academic writing. It has been claimed, however, that this interactional view of written discourse is not strongly established in academic texts written by novice writers (Thomson, 2001). A considerable number of studies have shown that in comparison with expert writers’ texts in published journals or NS’ academic writings, inexperienced writers’ texts are often inappropriate and/or ineffective with regard to the use of metadiscourse (Crismore, Markkanen & Steffensen, 1993; Ha, 2014; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Hinkel, 2002; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Oh, 2007; Oh & Kang, 2013). As Hyland (2005) noted, “a lack of familiarity with the metadiscourse conventions central to many expository genres in English may be detrimental to learners’ academic performance” (p.136).

Evidence suggests that metadiscourse also plays a pivotal role in the maintenance of interaction in argumentative essays that distinguishes good writings from poor writings (e.g., Crismore et al., 1993; Huh & Lee, 2016; Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995; Kim & Lee, 2014; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Oh & Kang, 2013). With argumentative prose as the most common genre that college students write (Johns, 1995, as cited in Wu, 2006, p.330), most Korean undergraduates are asked to write persuasive essays rather than narratives or expository essays in English. Learners’ lack of knowledge on the precise concept of argumentation, however, has been stated as one of the main obstacles for facilitating interaction in their essays (Wingate, 2012).

Thus far, a growing body of literature has explored the use of metadiscourse markers with regard to second/foreign language (L2) learners’ argumentative writing (e.g., Anwardeen, Luyee, Gabriel & Kalajahi, 2013; Crismore et al., 1993; Ha, 2014; Huh & Lee, 2016; Kim & Lee, 2014; Kim & Suh, 2014; Lee & Deakin, 2016; Oh, 2007; Oh & Kang, 2013). Most studies, however, have been rather narrow in focus dealing only with sub-features of metadiscourse (e.g., logical connectors, epistemic modality, hedges and boosters, interactional resources), and the evidence for the relationship between the overall metadiscourse use and writing proficiency remains relatively inconclusive. In this study, we report on a corpus-based comparative analysis of the impact of L2 writing proficiency on the metadiscourse use. Specifically, the study was guided by the following two research questions:

- ① How do the frequency and use of metadiscourse markers in Korean EFL learners' L2 writing vary according to the different proficiency levels?
- ② How does the range of the use of metadiscourse markers in Korean EFL learners' L2 writing vary according to the different proficiency levels?

## II. Literature Review

### A. Metadiscourse and theoretical framework

Metadiscourse, which literally means ‘discourse about discourse’, includes both textual and interpersonal aspect of a text that constructs a discourse, engages the reader, and expresses the author’s attitude (Hyland, 1998a). It is, therefore, a fundamental aspect in persuasive and academic writing, where readers’ understanding of and involvement in the text plays a contributing role from the perspective of writing as a form of dynamic communication between the writer and the audience. The sub-elements of metadiscourse is concerned with how writers can seek to project themselves through the text, relate to the audience, produce a coherent text, and convey their positions on the content to the readers.

Widely varying classifications of metadiscourse have emerged (e.g., Beauvais, 1989; Crismore, 1989; Hyland, 1998a; Mauranen, 1993; Vande Kopple, 1985), but they all agree that metadiscourse takes account of the readers’ needs, existing knowledge, experiences and that it expresses writer-reader interactions. This study will use the theoretical framework suggested by Hyland (2005) who classified it into interactive and interactional resources (refer to Table 1 for more detailed information).

<Table 1> An Interpersonal model of metadiscourse (Hyland, 2005, p. 49)

Category	Function	Examples
<b>Interactive</b>	<b>Help to guide the reader through the text</b>	<b>Resources</b>
Transitions	express relations between main clauses	in addition; but; thus; and
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages	finally; to conclude; my purpose is
Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	noted above; see Fig; in section 2
Evidentials	refer to information from other texts	according to X; Z states
Code glosses	elaborate propositional meanings	namely; e.g.; such as; in other words
<b>Interactional</b>	<b>Involve the reader in the text</b>	
Hedges	withhold commitment and open dialogue	might; perhaps; possible; about
Boosters	emphasize certainty or close dialogue	in fact; definitely; it is clear that

Attitude markers	express writer's attitude to proposition	unfortunately; I agree; surprisingly
Self mentions	explicit reference to author(s)	I; we; me; our
Engagement markers	explicitly build relationship with reader	consider; note; you can see

Interactive metadiscourse, also known as textual metadiscourse (Hyland, 1998a), refers to the logic of discourse: the interactive devices function to organize the text. They are used to construct propositional meanings in such ways that the readers can find them coherent. Transitions, most of which are conjunctions and adverbial phrases, help readers find semantic connection between ideas. They overtly link clauses in a writer's attempt to guide readers through his or her intended interpretations. Frame markers, on the other hand, are explicit text boundaries. They not only introduce or shift the discourse, but also signal the next step of an argument. They can mark the sequence of texts, label stages, and announce goals. This study did not take the other remaining interactive resources (i.e., endophoric markers, evidentials, code glosses) into consideration because they typically occur in academic writing (Hyland, 2005) and function to effectively present and discuss the results of a research study as well as previous studies in the same field.

Interactional metadiscourse, on the other hand, facilitates the readers' interpretation of an author's arguments by involving the readers into the text. This helps the audience interact and communicate with the writer, or between the text and themselves, thereby building an interactive writer-reader relationship. This also influences "the author's intimacy and remoteness, the expression of attitude, degree of reader involvement, apparent commitment to propositional content and so on" (Hyland, 1998a, p. 443). Among the five subcategories of interactional metadiscourse, we have identified hedges and boosters as central features in argumentative texts. These two features help writers provide their arguments with the expression of doubt or certainty. The ability to express doubt and certainty is a pragmatic skill that is strongly required of writers in contexts where they need to express their own arguments on controversial social issues or speculative topics (Holmes, 1982; Oh & Kang, 2013).

Hedges such as *possible*, *likely*, *seem*, and *doubt* are the items which imply that a writer has some degree of uncertainty or tentativeness in expressing their propositions. This reflects the writer's attitude acknowledging that their beliefs may not always be true, thus increasing the chance that readers would be more likely to negotiate with the writer's argument. Conversely, boosters convey writers' certainty and confidence in their claim. Items such as *of course*, *clear*, *obvious*, *conclude*, and *evident* belong to this category. The use of boosters tends to close a dialogue with readers by disallowing alternative views. Accordingly, it is important to maintain the balance between hedges and boosters in persuasive writing because a writer's receptive attitude with a strong expression of their arguments allows the audience to intergrate their thoughts into the text.

## B. Previous studies on L2 learners' metadiscourse use

Numerous studies have attempted to explore L2 learners' metadiscourse use in persuasive and/or academic writing, addressing the differences between the learners and NS in this regard. These studies explained to what extent the learners struggle when processing their arguments in a coherent and reader-friendly manner in L2 text.

First, several lines of evidence suggest that NNSs' overuse and/or underuse of certain interactive metadiscourse markers tends to result in damage to coherent written products. For instance, Hinkel (2002) found that Asian EFL students relied more on frequent use of transition devices in phrase-level (e.g., *and*, *but*, *yet*) than NS, thereby producing lengthy and complex clauses. Unlike NSs, the learners also exhibited predominant use of sentence-level transitions (e.g., *however*, *moreover*, *therefore*) and sequential frame markers (e.g., *first*, *lastly*, *in conclusion*). In a similar vein, Ha (2014) reports that Korean EFL learners overuse certain types of additive adverbials (e.g., *moreover*, *besides*, *furthermore*) but underuse contrastive adverbials (e.g., *yet*, *instead*), with those logical connectors mostly found at the sentence-initial position. According to Ventola and Mauranen (1991), Finnish learners of English used temporal connectors such as *firstly*, *secondly* less frequently than NSs, but they were similar to the Asian learners in the repetitive and ineffective use of a small set of other connectors (e.g., *also*, *however*, *on the other hand*).

With respect to the interactional resources, a great deal of previous research have confirmed the significance of the domain of hedges and boosters in predicting successful interactive writings (e.g., Hyland & Milton, 1997; Hyland, 1998b; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995; Kim & Suh, 2014; Park, 2006). In the case of Hyland and Tse's (2004) study, doctoral writers showed more extensive use of interactional metadiscourse markers than master students, implying that doctoral students better perceived the importance of engaging their audience than master students did. It was also noted in Oh's (2007) research that compared with NS counterparts, L2 learners' writings revealed a narrower range and limited grammatical classes of epistemic device usages.<sup>1</sup>

The learners were less balanced in terms of the semantic categories of epistemic modality as well, showing stronger commitments to statements than the NS writers. Similarly, Kim and Suh (2014) evidenced that NNS made stronger persuasive effort whereas NS managed the balance in the expression of doubt and certainty in their writing.

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<sup>1</sup> Hedges and boosters are often together referred to as epistemic stance markers, which consist of a variety of lexical and grammatical forms used to express a writer/speaker's commentary on a proposition. They convey a certain degree of "certainty (or doubt), actuality, precision, or limitation" (Biber et al., 1999, p.972)

Regarding writing proficiency, lower level learner groups employed a limited range and types of epistemic metadiscourse markers with emphatic assertions while advanced groups showed more balanced distributions in epistemic rhetorical stance, with hedges used more than boosters (Kim & Suh, 2014; Oh & Kang, 2013).

The evidence reviewed here seems to support the critical role of effective metadiscourse use in academic/argumentative writing. The findings have pointed to both quantitative and qualitative differences between successful and less successful essays. Yet, more information is needed about the relationship between writing proficiency and *overall* metadiscourse use that is not limited to one category of metadiscourse to the exclusion of the other. In an attempt to complement previous studies, the current study aims to investigate the correlation between L2 writing proficiency and the employment of both interactional and interactive metadiscourse markers in persuasive texts.

### III. Methodology

#### A. The Corpora

The analysis of the present study is based on two sets of corpora drawn from Yonsei English Learner Corpus (YELC) and Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS). YELC is a collection of Korean EFL learner corpus of English essays written by 3,286 high school graduates (1,958 males and 1,328 females) admitted to Yonsei University in 2011 (Rhee & Jung, 2014). It consists of a total of 6,572 argumentative and narrative essays (1,085,879 words) on diverse topics (e.g., personal favorites, experiences, physical punishment, using mobile phones while driving). All the essays were graded by trained NSs or equally qualified evaluators into nine levels (from A0 to C2) based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).<sup>2</sup> LOCNESS contains argumentative and literary essays written by British and American university students (324,304 words) on a variety of topics (e.g., nuclear power, animal testing, capital punishment). Only essays of argumentative mode were used in this study.

Prior to data selection, YELC was categorized into three proficiency levels: A1+ and A2 for basic, B1, B1+ and B2 for intermediate, and B2+ and C1 for advanced, excluding

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<sup>2</sup> The association between *TOEFL iBT* ® scores of the writing section and the CEFR levels indicates that the minimum scores corresponding to A2, B1, B2, and C1 are 7, 13, 17, and 24, respectively, out of 30 scaled points (Papageorgiou, Tannenbaum, Bridgeman & Cho, 2015).

the essays with the lowest (A0) and the highest (C2) grades. A0 writings were excluded because the essays were composed only of a few sentences and contained excessive grammatical and syntactic errors, which led to difficulty in understanding the content of the texts. C2 writings were not included due to the extremely small number of essays. We assumed that NS' writings from LOCNESS represent the highest proficiency level. For data analysis, a manageable amount of essays were selected randomly, but with care, from each proficiency level. The number of words was a critical factor to consider in the data selection in order to make the size of corpus comparable across three proficiency levels of the NNS corpora (i.e., around 30,000 words) on the one hand, and between the NNS and the NS corpora (i.e., about 91,000 words), on the other. We also made it sure that the selected set of data was representative of each level with respect to essays' length and writer's gender, thereby minimizing the risk of distorting the nature of the original data. Table 2 provides more detailed information of the data used in the current study.

<Table 2> Corpus Size of Each Proficiency Level Writing

Corpus	NNS				NS
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Total	
Tokens	30,392	30,385	30,394	91,171	91,177
Types	2,877	2,873	3,212	5,587	7,968
Essays	225	120	100	445	117

## B. Analytic procedure

The analysis of corpora in this study was based on the analytical framework of Hyland's (1998a, 2005) interpersonal model of metadiscourse. Specifically, the study adopted the list of metadiscourse markers provided in Hyland (2005), examining a total of 182 metadiscourse markers (73 interactive and 109 interactional resources).

The analytic procedure involved the following steps. First, the target metadiscourse markers, 182 in total, were searched for one by one in all the subsets of the data, using a concordancing software, *WordSmith Tools 7.0* (Scott, 2016). All the examples containing a potential metadiscourse marker were subjected to manual inspection in order to identify only the items functioning in metadiscourse context. Same items were often categorized differently according to its use in the specific context. For instance, in example (1) the item *again* functions as a transition marker to signal the pragmatic relations between the stretches of discourse in an argument. In example (2), in contrast, the same item is used as a mere adverbial to deliver the meaning of repetitive action.

- (1) If this were not amazing enough, the microwave cuts cooking time in half. If you had told someone 100 yrs ago that you could cut cooking time in half, and not use fire, they would have thought you crazy, or bewitched, or under the influence of heavy drugs. [...] **Again**, time is conserved -- Children are able to use this simple device without parental fear of fires starting. (NS)
- (2) Though we should pursue peaceful negotiation, in case the war breaks out **again**, South Korea needs soldiers. (Advanced)

Next, the items functioning as metadiscourse markers within their context of use were counted under each of the four major categories of metadiscourse devices (i.e., transitions, frame markers, hedges, and boosters). For transitions, in particular, the cases were again subcategorized into additive, causal and contrastive devices for further inquiry. Items with the same root but with different inflectional affixes (e.g., *believe*, *believes*, *believed*, *believing*) were considered forms of the identical lexemes and went through lemmatization. The findings were then compared across the corpora in terms of a) the overall density of metadiscourse use, b) the proportion of the two main categories of metadiscourse use (i.e., interactive and interactional resources) and of their subcategories, and c) the range of metadiscourse makers from each subcategory. Chi-square tests were conducted using SPSS 21 to determine whether differences in the frequency of metadiscourse use according to proficiency levels are statistically significant, with the significance level set at .05. Finally, actual writing data were closely examined in order to find out distinctive patterns and/or uses, if there are any, of a particular proficiency level.

## IV. Results and Discussion

### A. The frequency and use of metadiscourse markers

#### 1. Overall frequencies

This section describes the use of metadiscourse markers across the corpora in terms of overall frequencies. Table 3 shows the frequencies of the metadiscourse use by NNS and NS divided by the two major categories, i.e., the interactive and the interactional resources.



&lt;Table 3&gt;The Frequency of Interactive and Interactional Metadiscourse Markers

	NNS				NS
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Total	
Interactive resources	878 (288.9)	913 (300.5)	896 (294.8)	2,687 (294.7)	1,378 (151.1)
Interactional resources	845 (278.0)	729 (239.9)	778 (256.0)	2,352 (258.0)	2,213 (242.7)
Total	1,723 (566.9)	1,642 (540.4)	1,674 (550.8)	5,039 (552.7)	3,591 (393.8)

Note. The figures in the parentheses show the number of uses per 10,000 words.

The table above clearly indicates that the Korean EFL learners showed more frequent use of metadiscourse markers ( $n=5,039$ ) than NSs ( $n=3,591$ ), with the difference being statistically significant ( $\chi^2=232.08$ ,  $p<.05$ ). This is largely due to the difference in the number of the interactive markers used in the two sets of corpora. The NNS' use of interactive metadiscourse ( $n=2,687$ ) was found to be about twice that of NS' ( $n=1,378$ ), and this difference led to a large gap between the two groups in the frequency of overall metadiscourse use. Put differently, the proportion of the interactive and interactional resources displays a noticeable disparity between the two groups (see Figure 1).

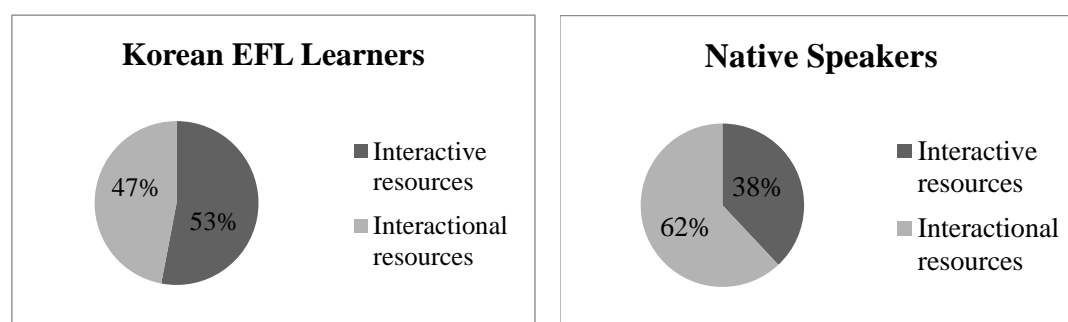


Figure 1. The Proportion of Interactive and Interactional Metadiscourse

While the learners relied slightly more on the use of the interactive resources (53%) than the interactional ones (47%), NSs used the interactional devices about 1.5 times more frequently (62%) than the interactive resources (38%). These findings support previous research which found that less competent writers, as opposed to skilled writers, display heavier reliance on the interactive resources than the interactional resources (e.g., Anwardeen *et al.*, 2013; Boshraadi, Biria, & Zavari, 2014; Byun, 2015; Crismore *et al.*, 1993; Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995; Lee, 2009). The higher proportion of interactional resources in NS data implies that NSs tend to put greater effort on the

management of controlling the appropriate level of personality in their argumentation. This finding again is in agreement with those of earlier studies indicating that advanced writers employ interpersonal devices more often than textual ones (e.g., Crismore *et al.*, 1993; Huh & Lee, 2016).

The present study also accords with earlier reports that NNS/novice writers showed higher density than NS/expert writers in overall metadiscourse use (e.g., Boshraadi *et al.*, 2014; Byun, 2015; Kim, S. H., 2014; Lee, 2009). There also exist, however, contradictory findings that good essays are more likely to exhibit higher frequency of metadiscourse use than poor essays (e.g., Huh & Lee, 2016; Intaraprawat & Steffensen, 1995). Such seemingly inconsistent results may be attributable, at least in part, to the dissimilar design of the studies including specific genre of writing and/or sub-features of metadiscourse that are dealt with.

In contrast to the large difference noted in the current study between the NS and the NNS groups, the L2 writing proficiency of the NNS did not significantly affect the overall frequency of metadiscourse use ( $\chi^2=2.08$ ,  $p>.05$ ). While the difference in frequency between the NNS and the NS was statistically significant in all cases (i.e., interactive and interactional resources as well as total uses), the difference among the three NNS groups was statistically significant only in the interactional marker use ( $\chi^2=8.85$ ,  $p<.05$ ). In other words, the increase in L2 writing proficiency in NNS groups does not seem to result in improved performance in metadiscourse use at least in terms of the overall frequency. The effect of proficiency on the metadiscourse use becomes clearer, however, when the interactive and interactional resources are considered separately, the topics which we will turn to below.

## 2. Interactive resources

In the interactive category, the frequencies and uses of transitions and frame markers in each corpus were computed and compared across the corpora. The quantitative comparison by writing proficiency is shown in Table 4.

<Table 4> The Frequency of Interactive Resources

Interactive Resources	NNS				NS
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Total	
Transitions	782 (257.3)	749 (246.5)	709 (233.3)	2240 (245.7)	1275 (139.8)
Frame markers	96 (31.6)	164 (54.0)	187 (61.5)	447 (49.0)	103 (11.3)

Note. The figures in the parentheses show the number of uses per 10,000 words.

As can be seen in the table, the use of transitions far outnumbered the use of frame markers in both the NNS and NS groups. Transitions accounted for 83 percent of the total interactive resources in the learner group and 93 percent in the NS group, respectively. This corroborates the findings of previous studies (e.g., Anwardeen et al., 2013; Ha, 2014; Huh & Lee, 2016; Hyland, 1998a; Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Kim & Lee, 2014), which showed that the higher proportion of transition devices over frame markers was one of the common strategies used to “manage the information flow” (Hyland, 2004, p.138) found in persuasive texts.

It also needs to be noted that the NNS writers, without much regard to L2 proficiency, use transitions significantly more frequently (average  $n=245.7$ ) than do the NS writers ( $n=139.8$ ) ( $\chi^2=270.20$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Indeed, there was no statistically significant difference among the three NNS groups in this regard ( $\chi^2=3.68$ ,  $p>.05$ ). Frame markers are also significantly more frequent in the NNS writing (average  $n=49.0$ ) than in the NS counterpart ( $n=11.3$ ) ( $\chi^2=215.83$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Interestingly, the frequency of frame marker use increases in conjunction with L2 writing proficiency, with the difference among the three NNS groups being statistically significant ( $\chi^2=30.20$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Given that frame markers function to mark text boundaries explicitly, it may be expected that longer texts include a greater number of frame marker devices, which seems to be the case in the NNS data. In line with the finding that text length is the strongest predictor of L2 writing proficiency (Kim, J. Y., 2014), the NNS essays with higher proficiency were characteristically longer than those with lower proficiency. One puzzle remains, however, about the less frequent use of frame markers in the NS data, which is much greater in length than the NNS data. This may possibly be accounted for by qualitative differences between the two data such as the types and ranges of frame markers used (see section 4.2). Specifically, the NNS groups exhibited mechanical, excessive use of a small set of ordinal numbers (e.g., *first*, *second*), which seemed to be the result of ineffective learning of frame markers in L2 writing. In the NS data, such inappropriate use of frame markers occurred much less irrespective of the length of writings.

In addition to the quantitative information that learners use more or less metadiscourse items than NS, it is also of great interest how differently and/or (in)appropriately learners use those resources. In the following, we present some example cases to make comparisons among proficiency levels. In the case of transitions, which link clauses to make texts coherent, NS showed greater competence than the learners in connecting ideas in a logical and reasonable way. Let us compare the three excerpts below, which were written by a native writer, an intermediate-level learner, and a basic-level learner, respectively. In excerpt (3), a transition item, *again*, relates the preceding and the following evidence closely so as to justify and reinforce the author's assertion. The writer presents his/her argument in the first two sentences with several supporting

evidence in the following paragraphs. The transition marker *again* occurs following the second supporting idea, which strengthens the writer's assertion. In terms of writing proficiency, it seems that the lower the L2 writing proficiency, the less the pragmatic understanding of the same marker. That is, in contrast to NS, intermediate-level learners tended to use this marker to simply repeat their positions without concrete supporting ideas, which is the case in excerpt (4). Besides, it was found that a basic-level writer employed the transition marker in a way to copy his/her introductory proposition into the concluding remarks, as given in excerpt (5).

(3) The debate of boxing, whether it should be continued or not, is a very heated one, just as the sport itself is very intense. There are many valid arguments on either side, however, in the end the choice must rest upon the shoulders of the individual.

[...] Another strong argument for the case against boxing is that participants are more likely to receive long term damage to the brain, "punch drunk". Participants in other dangerous sports will normally retire unscathed. Boxers however will be lucky to escape some sort of ill effects, however minor. **Again** however, in a modern "force" thinking society where people must be allowed to choose their own future, the choice lies with the individual. (NS)

(4) I think using animals to improve medical technology is inevitable. Without experiments, we cannot be certain about the medicine. So to make a new medicine, experiments should be done. Still, there is more to say. Should animals excluding human being be used in medical experiments? **Again**, I will say yes. (Intermediate)

(5) I agree of comming physical punishment. I totally think that teacher should teach also the social protocol not only pure knowledge. These days nobody want to have kids to be punished in school, but I think that trend is spoiling the future of society. [...] We should teach our future properly, and strictly. **Again**, I agree with the physical punishment of children. (Basic)

For another example, NS use (*even*) *though* not only to express opposition to evidence, but to point out limitations or alternatives (see excerpts (6) and (7)). This stands in contrast to excerpts (8), (9), and (10), where learners use the same device to introduce a proposition which contradicts the writer's own claim, resulting in quite unconvincing argument.

- (6) **Even though** the divorce rate appears to have stabilized, the fact is that over the last fifteen to twenty years the divorce rate has been higher than it has ever been in our society. (NS)
- (7) [...] **though** we may not always remember the other significant events, we will always remember the day the wall fell. (NS)
- (8) **Even though** some people that do not love animals think the animals are just animals, they should understand others that love animals as family members. (Basic)
- (9) I strongly disagree with the physical punishment, especially that of children. **Even though** I partly agree with that the physical punishment has some kind of good effects on children, but, in my opinion, it has much more bad effects on them. (Intermediate)
- (10) **Even though** most Koreans think they live in peace, Korea is not a peaceful country. (Advanced)

The excerpts of three different proficiency levels in NNS group indicate that L2 writing proficiency may not have discernable effect on the use of certain transition markers such as (*even*) *though*.

### 3. Interactional resources

With regard to interactional resources, comparisons were made in the frequency of hedges and boosters across the four corpora. The results revealed that the use of hedges and boosters largely differentiates proficiency levels, thus reflecting the significance of interactional metadiscourse use in argumentative texts. Table 5 below displays detailed information on the frequency in each corpus.

<Table 5> The Frequency of Interactional Resources

Interactional Resources	NNS			Total	NS
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced		
Hedges	256 (84.2)	271 (89.2)	396 (130.3)	923 (101.2)	1195 (131.1)
Boosters	589 (193.8)	458 (150.7)	382 (125.7)	1429 (156.7)	1018 (111.7)

Note. The figures in the parentheses show the number of uses per 10,000 words.

As can be seen in the table above, boosters occur more frequently than hedges in the NNS writing (with the exception of the advanced-level), unlike in the NS text. Specifically, the NNS' use of hedges and boosters constituted about 39% and 61% of the total interactional devices, respectively. In contrast, NS exhibited a relatively balanced use of hedges and boosters (hedges: 54%, boosters: 46%), with the hedges showing a slightly higher frequency (see Figure 2). The underuse of hedges and concomitant overuse of boosters by Korean EFL learners are in line with previous findings (e.g., Huh & Lee, 2016; Kim & Suh, 2014; Oh, 2007; Park, 2006).

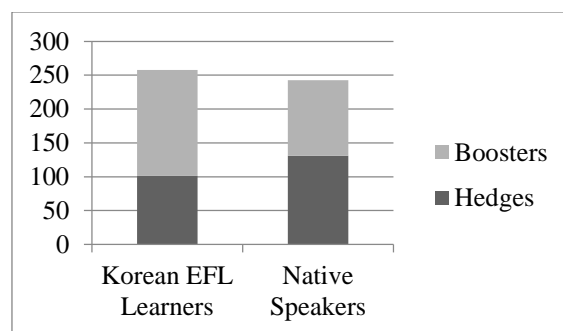


Figure 2. The Proportion of Hedges and Boosters

Chi-square tests have confirmed that frequency differences between the NNS and NS groups in the use of hedges ( $\chi^2=35.30$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and boosters ( $\chi^2=79.00$ ,  $p<.001$ ) are both statistically significant. The three proficiency levels of the NNS groups were also showed statistically significant differences in the frequency of hedges ( $\chi^2=38.80$ ,  $p<.001$ ) as well as boosters ( $\chi^2=46.80$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The findings imply that the use of interactional resources is a stronger indicator of L2 writing competence than that of interactive resources. This result tends to coincide with previous studies in that novice writers are less strategic in balancing interactional resources, with the hedges underused (Allison, 1995; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Oh & Kang, 2013).

Figure 3 below displays that the frequency of hedge usage increases markedly from the intermediate to the advanced NNS group. The two lines representing the frequency of hedges and boosters intersect within the advanced group, which suggests that advanced learners understand, to some extent, that hedge use is an essential element in processing their argumentation in English. In contrast to them, basic learners take a very forceful and straightforward attitude by using the boosters more than twice as much as the hedges.

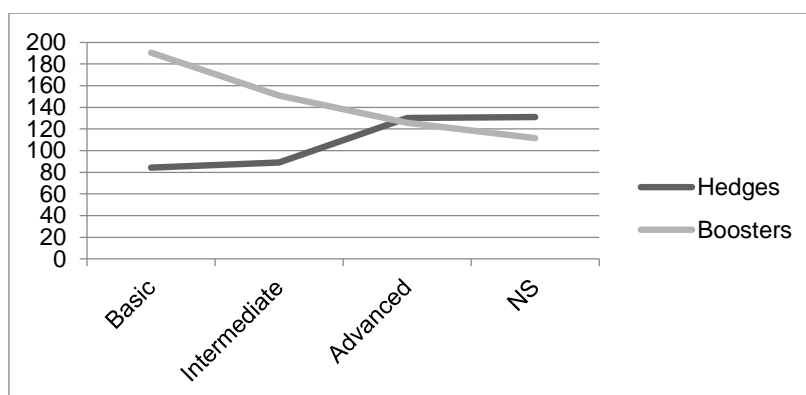


Figure 3. The Quantitative Comparison of Hedges and Boosters According to Writing Proficiency

The three proficiency levels also revealed some qualitative differences in the use of hedges and boosters. Regarding hedges, several items that occurred in higher proficiency levels were not found in the lower level. Items such as *mainly*, *possibly*, *largely*, *fairly*, *rather*, *unclear* and *suppose* did not occur either in intermediate or basic data. Other items such as *in most cases*, *seem* and *tend to* showed a clear tendency to increase in use as the proficiency developed. In contrast, boosters such as *I know*, *must*, *of course*, *really*, *sure*, and *think* seemed to decrease in number as the proficiency developed.

In general, higher-level writers seemed to understand the appropriate usage of interactional markers better than lower-level writers. For instance, excerpts from (11) to (13) below show different uses and/or patterns of a hedge marker *seem* in the NNS data. The least proficient learners, as given in (11), do not appear to understand the grammatical and/or appropriate use of the item while the intermediate-level learners tended to use the same item in *it*-clauses as shown in (12). Some advanced writers employed the marker in their conclusions in a way to acknowledge the possibility of opinions conflicting with their claims (see excerpt (13)).

(11) These days, many student don't listen advise because they search the internet about their problem not teacher but computer. Then they were **seem** to trust internet data then teacher's advise. I think that physical punishment should be allowed in all schools.  
(Basic)

(12) In Korea, teachers have given physical punishment to their students, even though they know it occurs physical pains. It **seems** that physical punishment solve troubles between teachers

and students, but it do not solve problems that students have.

(Intermediate)

(13) So, other ways should be applied for students rather than physical punishments. Although it **seems** that sometimes the 'physical' thing equals fast and clean, education should be the subject of applying that formula. (Advanced)

It needs to be noted, however, that even the advanced-level learners display some noteworthy qualitative differences from the NS in the use of interactional resources. Specifically, they showed a tendency to employ certain boosters in ineffective collocational patterns, which results in unnecessary increase in the force of argument. For example, the learners often placed emphatic adverbs such as *confidently*, *strongly*, *so*, *firmly*, *wholeheartedly* before epistemic verbs such as *argue*, *believe*, *claim*, *conclude*, *demonstrate*, or epistemic adjectives such as *certain*, *clear*, and *obvious*. Unlike the learners, the NS strategically 'hedged' their claims by combining hedges and boosters more effectively. Compare the following excerpts:

(14) I **strongly argue** that animals should be used in medical experiments no matter what critics say due to some convincing reasons. (Advanced)

(15) For these reasons, I **would argue** that the only inventions of the twentieth century that have significantly changed people's lives for the better are those that have occurred in the medical field. (NS)

(16) It **can be argued** that scientists only make discoveries, and it is others who misuse their work; Marie Curie could not have foreseen the nuclear threat of the cold war as she worked with radioactive samples. (NS)

In the learners' data, the verb *argue* always occurred in the active voice, with the writers directly expressing their stance in a rather forceful way as in (14). In the NS' data, the same verb mostly occurred with hedging items as in (15) or within *it*-clauses<sup>3</sup> as in (16), thereby marking reluctance to convey writers' certainty.

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<sup>3</sup> It has been observed that *it*-clauses in academic writing function to deliver the writers' opinions, make a comment on and discuss propositions "in a way that allows the writer to remain in the background" (Hewings & Hewings, 2002, p. 368).



In a similar vein, while most instances of the verb *conclude* in concluding remarks of the learner data occurred with a forceful sense of calling for action as in (17), NS typically withheld a full commitment to their position by tactically using hedge devices (see excerpt 18).

(17) To **conclude**, *all* Korean men *should* complete military service as it can be beneficial, and it is needed in current situation. (Advanced)

(18) To **conclude**, I *would like to* weigh up both sides of the argument. Boxing is a dangerous sport, granted, but I *feel* that I have to stress that it is the choice of the individual to take part in the event. (NS)

The results presented above have demonstrated that as the writer's L2 proficiency develops, the overall frequency of hedges and boosters becomes equivalent, approximating the native usage. As pointed out, however, even advanced L2 writers often lack the ability to convey their arguments in a more balanced and convincing way.

## B. The Range of Metadiscourse Use

Compared with the overall frequencies of metadiscourse markers, the range of metadiscourse use appears to be more directly proportional to writing proficiency. The number of different items used in the category of both interactive and interactional resources grows with rising proficiency (see Table 6). Yet, it is assumed that the range of metadiscourse use is a less powerful index of writing proficiency compared to the frequency of metadiscourse use since the statistical comparison between different levels has turned out to be significant neither in the interactional ( $\chi^2=3.18$ ,  $p>0.05$ ) nor the interactional resources ( $\chi^2=2.55$ ,  $p>0.05$ ).

<Table 6> The Range of Metadiscourse Markers

The Number of Different Items	NNS			NS
	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	
<i>Interactive resources</i>	36	52	54	60
Transitions	22	33	35	41
Frame markers	14	19	19	19
<i>Interactional resources</i>	58	61	83	105
Hedges	31	33	45	59
Boosters	27	28	38	46

Let us look more closely at each subcategory. First, as for transitions, the difference in range between the intermediate and the advanced levels was small (33 vs. 35), but the difference between the basic (22) and the advanced levels (35) was quite distinct. The transition markers that the advanced learners often used but did not occur even a single time in the basic learners' writing include *accordingly*, *additionally*, *furthermore*, *rather*, *result in*, *lead to*, *still*, and *thereby*. There are also items (e.g., *as a consequence*, *conversely*, *whereas*) that were never found in any level of the NNS' writings. Interestingly, the range gap of additive adverbials (e.g., *additionally*, *besides*, *furthermore*) across proficiency levels was larger than other transitions such as causal or contrastive devices. While the additive devices of the basic learners' data were only limited to five items (e.g., *also*, *and*, *besides*, *in addition*, *moreover*), that of NS' totaled 11, which was more than twice as many as those found in the lowest-graded essays.

With regard to frame marker use, the item range value remained the same (19) in the intermediate, advanced, and native groups although it was greater than that in the basic level (14). It may thus be considered that NNS use a variety of frame marking items to specify the boundaries of the text and to signal the ordering of their argument, thereby assisting readers' understanding of the flow of argumentation. Despite the similar range of frame markers in different proficiency levels, however, NNS' excessive reliance on certain ordinal numbers (e.g., *first*, *second*, *first of all*) was the most distinct feature that deviated from NS' writings. In addition, some topic shifters (e.g., *now*, *in regard to*) that NS often employed did not occur in the NNS data.

In general, the range of interactional resources seems to show the effect of writing proficiency more clearly. As can be noted in Table 6, the range of hedge and booster use steadily increases with growing proficiency. This consistently indicates that the range of words produced by upper-level writers tends to be greater than that by lower-level ones, just as we have seen in the case of transitions above. Not unexpectedly, yet still importantly, the range of interactional markers seemed to relate to the "difficulty" of vocabulary as determined by the frequency. It was found that items used in higher-rated essays, but which did not occur in lower-level writings, were the words with lower frequency. For instance, the verb *estimate* (ranked 1811<sup>th</sup> in the corpus of contemporary American English (COCA)) was only observed in the NS data while the verb *argue* (ranked 779<sup>th</sup> in COCA) occurred in both the advanced learners' and the NS' writings. This supports Laufer and Nation's (1995) idea that word frequency correlates with vocabulary size. That is, compared to novice writers, a skilled writer is more likely to show rich and sophisticated vocabulary use in one's written product, including less and/or non-frequent words.

This section has revealed that the range of metadiscourse use is another predictor of writing proficiency. More expert writers with larger vocabulary size employed a greater

variety of metadiscourse devices in their writings. In other words, experienced writers are more proficient in employing metadiscourse items covering from less frequent to more frequent ones.

## **V. Conclusion**

The present study was undertaken to examine the extent to which argumentative texts produced by writers of different proficiency levels vary in their employment of metadiscourse resources. Specifically, the frequency and the range of metadiscourse markers were compared across different writing proficiency levels along with the examination of some qualitative differences. The main findings are summarized as follows. Regarding interactive resources, the differences in frequency between the NNS and the NS groups were larger than the differences by L2 writing proficiency. Both transitions and frame markers occurred more frequently in the NNS data than in the NS. Without much regard to proficiency, NNS learners showed unnecessarily heavy reliance on the use of transition items between clauses. Their use of frame markers, on the other hand, increased with higher proficiency, possibly reflecting more need for these markers in longer texts. As for interactional resources, in congruence with previous studies, not only did more proficient writers exhibit more frequent use of interactional markers than interactive markers, but they also employed those devices in more various and strategic ways. The higher frequency of hedging devices over boosters in experienced writers' essays indicated that expert writers are highly competent in presenting their arguments in modest and negotiable ways compared to inexperienced writers. Less competent writers, in contrast, offered more forceful arguments with frequent inclusion of boosters, which evidenced their relative lack of pragmatic competence in delivering a proper degree of certainty. These findings clearly demonstrate that the use of interactional devices is one of the most important features that render argumentative text more interactive and persuasive. The range of metadiscourse items increased according to writing proficiency in all subcategories (i.e., transitions, frame markers, hedges, boosters). It seemed that lower-level writers' reliance on a more limited range of metadiscourse devices is another (though less strong) indicator of writing proficiency. This result was rather expected considering that the higher the proficiency of the learners, the larger the vocabulary size (Laufer & Nation, 1995). In sum, the findings have identified some clear effects of writing proficiency on the use of metadiscourse. Through using metadiscourse features more appropriately and/or effectively compared with writers of lower proficiency, more skilled writers tended to succeed in taking into account readers during their writing process.

Based on the findings above, this study supports the idea that writing is an interactive communication between a writer and the audience. A clear understanding of this view on writing seems to be a first step in acknowledging the importance of audience awareness. The current research offered evidence to the importance of metadiscourse as a framework for understanding writing as interactive communication and social engagement. It was noted that metadiscourse relates to various means by which a writer establishes a rapport and communicates with an audience to project their ideas. By this dialogic role of metadiscourse writers will be empowered to acknowledge the presence of an audience, take their expectations into account, and express their attitudes with strategic use of metadiscourse devices in ways that readers find familiar and credible. Thus, a good writer is the one who assumes imagined readers in their writing process, deliberately fosters communications to assist their interpretation, and leaves space for the audience to project their desired response on the writer's argument.

The comparison of linguistic performance between nonnative learners of English and native speakers is often criticized from the perspective of "English as a lingua franca (ELF)" and "World Englishes." While we fully agree that in this era of globalization English does not belong to native speakers and they do not necessarily need to serve as the linguistic model for pedagogic purposes, we also believe that linguistic features which are highly effective in achieving particular communicative purposes and are often strategically employed by native speakers as opposed to non-native learners deserve pedagogic attention. In addition, the issue of teaching English writing is more likely to be complicated than that of teaching speaking due to its distinctive features of asynchronous communication. While intelligibility and comprehensibility may satisfy both listeners and speakers in real-time communication settings, where negotiation of meaning facilitates interaction, writers may struggle to meet the conventional expectations in an effort to build sound relationship with their assumed readers and to enhance their perception of a text. It may thus be necessary for teachers who embrace ELF perspectives to first, expose learners to both dominant and non-dominant forms of English, and second, to help them distinguish variations from errors in a particular genre of writing (e.g., argumentative mode) or a given context, and last, to help them be aware of certain features that may affect the interaction with and the judgments of readers. In this regard, metadiscourse needs to be developed in L2 writings because without it, "readers would be unable to contextualize a text and writers unable to communicate effectively" (Hyland, 2005, p. 14).

The findings of this study suggest some pedagogical implications. First, it seems that metadiscourse use in writing requires more explicit attention in the EFL classroom. The issues on how appropriately writers use metadiscourse markers take an important part of developing learners' pragmatic competence. Studies in the field of interlanguage pragmatics have found the positive effect of explicit instruction on the development of L2

pragmatic competence (e.g., House, 1996; Jeon & Kaya, 2006). Besides, a few empirical studies have demonstrated that explicit instruction on metadiscourse use does enhance the overall quality of writing (e.g., Dastjerdi & Shirzad, 2010; Fordyce, 2014; Yaghoubi & Ardestani, 2014), highlighting the importance of raising L2 learners' consciousness in the process of metadiscourse instruction. The provision of metapragmatic explanations and consciousness raising activities, for instance, assisted learners' pragmatic development in the use of epistemic stance both in the short-term and the long-term (Fordyce, 2014).

Developing learners' awareness on metadiscourse may be supported by the ample provision of model texts, which could take the form of direct use of corpus data in the classroom (Johns, 1991). The application of this data-driven learning approach will enable writing instructors to guide learners in formulating and testing hypotheses based on their investigation on certain metadiscourse devices from authentic data. For example, the provision of model texts including appropriately used interactive/interactional resources would be of greater help than that of vocabulary item lists merely matched with L1 meanings.

The effective expression of a precise degree of certainty has been recognized as the central convention of academic/argumentative written discourse (Hyland, 1998b; Lee & Deakin, 2016). Learners, however, may find it challenging to maintain balance in the expression of doubt and certainty because epistemic stance markers tend to be culturally and contextually dependent (Hinkel, 1995). In other words, these hedging and boosting markers can only be understood in relation to the contexts in which they appear. Learners should thus be offered a chance to develop pragmatic competence for the correct interpretation of these interactional devices with the help of adequate instructional materials.

The current findings add to a growing body of literature on metadiscourse use in written discourse by investigating writers' metadiscourse use at different proficiency levels and showing problems and difficulties that L2 learners face in producing an interactive text. The findings indicate that the realizations of metadiscourse vary across proficiency levels and emphasize its critical role in the success of essays. While this study corroborates some of the major previous findings, it also makes a unique contribution to the field by revealing that L2 writing proficiency has greater impact on the use of interactional resources than interactive ones, and also, on the frequency of metadiscourse use than the range. In addition, several cases of metadiscourse misuse were found in higher-level L2 writings, which were not much different from those in lower-level writings. The findings indicate that it is necessary for L2 teachers and/or writers to put more effort in the appropriate use of metadiscourse markers. We hope that this research can broaden our notion of writing as social communication by informing L2 writers and writing instructors of a crucial need for gaining more precise understanding of

metadiscourse use for building a persuasive and effective text. It should be noted, however, that the results may turn out different depending on how a researcher sets the standard for dividing proficiency levels. It would be worthwhile in the future to assess the effects of instructional practices on the use of metadiscourse use in L2 writing.

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